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## **LET'S LISTEN TO OUR SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS – THEY KNOW BETTER THAN ANYONE WHAT THEY NEED**

*Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz*



Bob Burgess is a minority business owner in South Norwalk. He says there needs to be better educational opportunities provided for small business owners, and the state needs to keep its commitment to assisting minority-owned businesses and ensuring small business owners understand how to become eligible to sell goods and services to the state.

Karen Mosca started up her own executive coaching business after leaving a position at IBM to branch out on her own. She says small business owners need better access to information on how to get into the state system, as well as better opportunities to learn “who’s who” in the statewide business community. In short, she says, she wants access to “the tools the big boys have.”

Chuck Chesler owns a small office supply and furniture store in Norwalk. He’s concerned with the perpetual traffic problems in this part of the state; what they do to businesses. He’d like to see state government act as a liaison to small businesses such as his, as a resource to provide support and solutions to concerns like these.

These people and about a dozen others all joined me recently at the “Economic & Business Roundtable” my office hosted at Norwalk City Hall, the fourth in our series of roundtable discussions at which he can hear directly from

the small business owners about what's on their minds, what their concerns are, and what state government can do to help.

It was a very productive meeting, co-hosted by State Senator Bob Duff of Norwalk – a member of the Legislature's Commerce Committee and a friend to small businesses - and also attended by Richard Moccia, Norwalk's new mayor. We've now visited Waterbury, Hartford, Milford, and Norwalk with these roundtables, and what we've heard and learned will help us to shape legislation we'll be developing with members of the Legislature's Commerce Committee in the coming year.

House Speaker Jim Amann and members of the Commerce Committee will be partners with us this year in our small business initiative, a top legislative priority for my office. We will work closely with the legislature to craft a bill that makes it easier for small businesses – including minority-and-women-owned businesses – to thrive and succeed in 2006 and beyond.

For more than a decade, our State's economic development policy has been to shower large corporations with tax breaks and incentives to either lure them to Connecticut or prevent them from leaving. What we heard at our most recent roundtable in Norwalk is while we have made some progress in Connecticut in cultivating and maintaining small businesses, there's still much more we can do.

This means fostering an environment in Connecticut where small businesses can start up with ease, communicate easily and efficiently with state agencies, purchase affordable health insurance, and hire well-trained, technically proficient employees. After all, businesses with fewer than 50 employees were responsible for 96.7 percent of Connecticut's private sector growth between 1996 and 2004.

During the time that the state doled out public money to private corporations, Connecticut's economy sputtered and lagged behind most of the country in terms of its economic recovery. To truly turn our economy around, we must stop the previous Administration's fascination with big corporations and direct our resources to our small businesses, the ones that actually drive Connecticut's economy.

There are many ways that we can all help at the state level. The roundtables are certainly one way, and another is a program I established five years ago when I first became Secretary of the State – the CT Small & Minority Business Showcase. These showcases provide one-stop shopping opportunities to help small and minority businesses navigate the complex process of starting a business in Connecticut, as well as display their products and services to further develop their

business. We've held eleven major showcases throughout the state so far, along with other seminars and networking opportunities, and have worked with more than 5,000 businesses and entrepreneurs in the process.

As the state's chief business registrar, the enhancement of the small business climate is critical to me, which is why hearing firsthand the frustrations and obstacles small business owners face is one of the most important parts of my job. People want advice in the procurement process and how to successfully enter it. They are the ones who are all-too-well aware of the problems traffic gridlock, an antiquated property tax system, and a lack of incentives can have on the small business owner. They are the ones who have to navigate the intricacies of the state's oft-confusing licensing and permitting process. I heard all this and more in Norwalk on my recent visit.

We need to streamline state assistance for small businesses. There is no need to have multiple agencies performing the same task – it wastes taxpayer dollars and causes confusion and delay for business owners. And, when those services are streamlined, the State must let business owners know whom, by name, they can contact for assistance. Access to information is often the most valuable commodity we can give our small business owners.

People like Bob Burgess, Karen Mosca, and Chuck Chesler are not alone with their concerns, nor are they unique in their desires to not just survive, but thrive as small business owners in Connecticut. Our legislative initiatives we unveil next month will do just that, and hopefully our friends in the legislative and executive branches will be right there with us. If we are to truly succeed in growing Connecticut's economy, we need to focus our energies on helping small businesses to grow. When small businesses succeed, everybody wins.

*Susan Bysiewicz is the Secretary of the State of Connecticut.*

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